

# Britain's Covid hope, Beirut's blast lingers, why insects are crucial

Last month we reported on how Britain - trusting in its high vaccination rate to lift Covid restrictions despite surging Delta variant cases - was increasingly seen by the world as a test case for pandemic control. It's early days and the data is not yet full enough to paint a clear picture, but as cases suddenly began to fall last week, scientists and politicians were asking if the country might have made a significant breakthrough.

Observer science editor Robin McKie examines what is happening, looks at what the coming months might hold and hears cautionary warnings from many experts. Then, for another perspective, Helen Sullivan reports from Australia, faced with many more weeks of tough restrictions as the country seemingly pays a price for its sluggish vaccination programme. **The big story Page 10** →

This time last year, Beirut suffered a devastating explosion in its docks that epitomised the political rot at the heart of the government. A year later, Martin Chulov returns to find that little has changed. Then, in the light of a crackdown in Tunisia, Simon Tisdall highlights the threat democracy faces when it fails to deliver its most urgent priority: better lives for voters. **Spotlight Page 15** →

There's lots to enjoy in our features and culture sections this week. Dave Goulson underlines the profound importance of insects for all life on Earth, while Simon Osborne profiles Henry, the vacuum cleaner that became an unlikely British symbol. And we catch up with US pop star Billie Eilish as she releases her latest album.

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Taking the theme of Covid slipping away like sands in an hourglass, illustrator Peter Reynolds says: "There have been many reasons over the past year to evoke the image of the hourglass - though usually it has alluded to the predicament of the human race or a deficit of ideas. How nice, then, to apply it to something more, dare I say it, hopeful." *Illustration: Peter Reynolds*



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